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U.S. Aware of Israeli Cluster Bomb Work

The Jonathan Jay Pollard spy case has apparently inspired a series of leaks by government officials who don't subscribe wholeheartedly to President Reagan's staunch support of Israel.

The latest of these stories involved cluster bombs. U.S. Customs Service officials leaked word that Israel is suspected of trying to obtain U.S. technology on the weapon.

We wrote about Israel's use of U.S.-made cluster bombs in Lebanon four years ago. Ariel Sharon, Israeli defense minister at the time of the 1982 invasion, admitted to us that he had authorized use of the bombs, despite Israel's 1978 pledge to use them only in the event of an attack by more than one Arab country.

Now our associate Donald Goldberg has obtained a secret Defense Department document that shows U.S. intelligence agencies have known for at least four years about Israel's development of its own cluster-bomb technology. The project was designed specifically to give Israel cluster bombs it can use without restrictions.

"Both Israel- and U.S.-made cluster bombs have probably been used by the Israeli Air Force in the conflict in Lebanon," the Defense Intelligence Agency report concludes. It was dated July 16, 1982, the day President Reagan stopped the shipment of new cluster bombs to Israel because of the controversy surrounding their use in Lebanon.

This allowed the White House to avoid an investigation into Israel's use of the U.S.-supplied bombs. If such an investigation had established that Israel had broken the 1978 agreement on

cluster-bomb restrictions—and it undoubtedly would have—then sale of all military items to Israel would have been stopped by law.

The secret DIA report explained that Israel's development of its own cluster bombs was "undoubtedly spurred" by the widespread criticism of their use in Lebanon, and Jerusalem's concern that the United States "might cut off supplies."

But the point is that even in 1982, Israel had a capability to produce cluster bombs and was "no longer completely dependent upon U.S. supplies of such munitions," the report says.

The report goes into some detail: "Israeli-made cluster bombs include the TAC-A, B, C, D and apparently also the TAL-1. These bombs were developed in the 1970s at the Rafael Armament Development Authority north of Haifa and are probably made there. Production of these munitions reflects Israel's desire not to be completely dependent on the U.S. for defense materiel."

Sharon's disclosure to us in 1982 was the first public acknowledgment by an Israeli official that the cluster bombs were being used in Lebanon. The bombs are canisters full of golf ball-sized pellets that explode like grenades on contact with a hard surface. But when they land on soft ground, the pellets often fail to detonate; they become alluring toys for children, who are then cruelly maimed or killed when the balls explode.

The secret Pentagon report raises an interesting question: If Israel has been developing its own cluster bombs since the 1970s, why would it need American technology, stolen or not? Yet this is what Customs Service officials have charged.